An Even Better Creation: The Role of Adam and Eve in Shiʿi Narratives about Fatimah al-Zahra

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This article explores how the Adamic narratives of the Qurʾan and the later hagiographical and theological traditions serve as a theological fulcrum through which Fatimah al-Zahra's roles establish a connection between the tripartite realms of pre-Creation, the earthly world, and the Day of Judgment. Fatimah represents the exoteric tradition of prophecy in which her father Muhammad is the seal of the prophets (*khatim al-nubuwwa*), and the esoteric knowledge and spirituality of the Imamate is manifested through her role as Mother of the Imamate (*umm al-aʾimma*). Fatimah's presence, whether physically or implicitly in the religious imagination, can be discerned through a close reading of several different aspects of traditions and exegesis of the story of Adam's creation and the rational knowledge given to him by God, as well as Eve's transgression and physical punishment.

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"Fatimah is not like the women of the children of Adam" (al-Haythami 1934, 9: 202). Speaking these words, the Prophet Muhammad declared his daughter's absolute ontological difference from the rest of God's creation. While Fatimah lived on this earth she possessed an earthly body, yet it was a façade, a *tromp l'oeil*, concealing her truly esoteric body that was fashioned out of light by God in the pre-Creation. It is this luminous self that constitutes Fatimah's essence, and in her role as the confluence of the two lights (*majmaʿ al-nurain*) of prophecy and the Shiʿi Imamate, attention is drawn repeatedly to Fatimah's exceptional body by theologians and her hagiographers. Fatimah's body exists through a deeply ingrained discourse of exceptional difference that characterizes her in the Shiʿi hagiographical and theological tradition. In apposition to Fatimah's exceptionally different body that is sinlessness (*ʿismah*) and existing in a state of perpetual purity (*taharah*) is the abject body of Eve, the wife of Adam. According to extra-Qurʾanic narratives drawn from the tradition of Israʾiliyyat, or prophetic stories derived from the Hebrew Bible and Christian apocrypha, Eve's punishment for transgressing the boundaries set by God were marked on her body: menstruation and pain and bleeding in childbirth and after. Eve's punishment transformed her body from a state of perpetual purity in the heavenly Garden into its earthly form that existed in a state of perpetual gendered impurity rooted in the ways in which she bleeds vaginally.

By the tenth century CE a rich and complex tradition of narratives had emerged in the Shiʿi tradition that placed Fatimah at the center of the Qurʾan, the lines of prophecy and Imamate, and exalted her as the "best of women" (*khair al-nisaʾ*) and the "mistress of the women of the two worlds" (*sayyidat nisaʾ al-ʿalamain*). At the center of this burgeoning body of religious writing, the Shiʿa marked Fatimah's body as exceptionally different, the transcendent vessel ordering "the entire cosmic university and sacred history of Islam" (Klemm 2005: 199). In the tenth century as Shiʿism emerged as a distinct doctrinal and legal tradition in Islam, Fatimah's exceptionally different body became its central symbol to which Sunni Muslims could make no claim. Fatimah's transcendence is explained through Eve's abjection, who sinned not only by eating from the Tree of Eternal Life and making it bleed but also more importantly for her envy of the Prophet Muhammad's daughter and his household, the *ahl-e bait* (Majlisi 1983, 11: 165; Thurlkill 2007: 83).

ISRAʾILIYYAT IN SUNNI AND SHIʿI TEXTUAL TRADITIONS

Drawing upon textual materials both theological and hagiographical in Persian, Urdu, and Arabic, this article explores several interrelated

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aspects of Fatimah's transcendent status as the mother of prophecy and the Imamate in Shiʿism and how her exceptional body reflects her transcendence in the religious imagination. My analysis engages Shiʿi and Sunni *hadith* collections, Qurʾanic commentaries (*tafsir*), and a contemporary hagiography written by a Pakistani Sufi that refers extensively to Shiʿi textual traditions. Inflecting all of these texts is the genre of Israʾiliyyat, or prophetic stories, which emerged as a form of Islamic literature in the eighth century and flourished during the ninth and tenth centuries—the same period when Shiʿism was emerging as a distinct branch of Islam.

The genre of Israʾiliyyat is foundational to many of the narratives about Adam and Eve that appear in Shiʿi and Sunni collections of Qurʾanic exegesis (*tafsir*), reports (*hadith*) of the words, and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (and in Shiʿism also of the Imams) and is a rich source for Sufi and Shiʿi composers of devotional poetry and narratives dedicated to the family of the Prophet Muhammad (*ahl-e bait*). Beyond its role as a supplement to the Qurʾan, the Israʾiliyyat is a genre of fables and miraculous stories in which the prophets and their counterparts endure great struggles, demonstrate their faith, and experience the divine.

An influential genre of religious literature, the Israʾiliyyat has a mixed reception history in the Sunni tradition, whereas "the Shiʿa took a special interest in the stories about the prophets of *Banu Israʾil*" (Rubin 1979: 51). In the fourteenth century, Sunni religious scholars such as Ismaʿil ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373), an expert on the Qurʾan and *hadith*, decried the falsity of the Israʾiliyyat. For many Sunnis the fictiveness of the Israʾiliyyat has enhanced its popularity, as demonstrated by the flourishing of such collections of prophetic stories as al-Thaʿlabi's (d. 427/1035), *Qisas al-anbiya* (The Lives of the Prophets), and the tenth century pseudonymous author Muhammad ibn ʿAbdallah al-Kisaʾi's *Qisas al-anbiya*. The Israʾiliyyat maintained its appeal across the Sunni-Shiʿi divide because of its edifying, elaborative, and entertaining value. Significantly, these extra-Qurʾanic narratives were immensely valuable in the propagation of sectarian ideology and distinctiveness.

The Shiʿi religious imagination creatively appropriated elements of the Israʾiliyyat and earlier Sunni *hadith* literature, Qurʾanic commentaries, and histories, transforming them to reflect a distinctive doctrine and theology that is articulated through Fatimah's exceptionally different body. Fatimah's body is marked as exceptionally different from other human (and supernatural) women in four different ways: her heavenly conception, her body as the source of prophecy and the Imamate, her absolute purity, and her virginal state. In the narrative threads examined in this article, Fatimah's exceptionally different body is the link between

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the realm of pre-Creation and the Day of Judgment. The distinctiveness of Shiʿi doctrine and theology is expressed through the creative appropriation of Fatimah's body.

Those Muslim scholars who have rejected the Israʾiliyyat for its Jewish and Christian elements have also criticized its imaginative, fictive qualities. For such Sunni and Shiʿi scholars as al-Tabari, Majlisi, al-Tabarsi, and al-Thaʿlabi, the contents of the Israʾiliyyat are "real," and their imaginative narration signifies an opening of possibility of meaning. In his study of the value of narrativity in the writing of history, Hayden White reveals the artificiality of the binary opposition of the imaginary and the real:

> Such a fiction would have posed no problems before the distinction between real and imaginary events was imposed upon the storyteller; storytelling becomes a problem only *after* two orders of events dispose themselves before him as possible components of his stories and his storytelling is compelled to exfoliate under the injunction to keep the two orders unmixed in his discourse. . . . Narrative becomes a *problem* only when we wish to give *real* events the *form* of a story (White 1980: 8).

Shiʿi narratives about Fatimah that construct her exceptionally different body to function as *the* sign of doctrinal and cosmological difference consciously blur the line between the real and imaginary. In her study of how Fatimah's legendary image was formed in Shiʿism, Verena Klemm has observed how, "Motifs and narratives were taken from folk stories of the saints and from fairy-tales, once woven into the text, now turn the dense narrative (corresponding to the function of a legend) into a neat medium for conveying Shiite teachings to a wide circle of believers" (2005: 205). For the Shiʿa, the religious imagination is of paramount importance: all texts can be creatively and imaginatively engaged for the purpose of defining and disseminating Shiʿism's principle doctrines.

In this article, we pay close attention to how Israʾiliyyat narratives of Adam and Eve's creation, life in the Garden, the Fall, and their punishment are emplotted by Shiʿi writers such as ʿAllamah Muhammad Baqir Majlisi (d. 1110/1698) and al-Fadl ibn al-Hasan al-Tabarsi (d. 548/1153), who are influenced by the Sunni scholar Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari's (d. 310/923) universal Islamic history *Tarikh al-rusul w'al-muluk* (The History of Prophets and Kings), which is an important source for stories about Adam and Eve. In the Shiʿi religious imagination, Israʾiliyyat stories about Adam and Eve are woven around narratives about Fatimah. These stories focus on Fatimah's creation, her existence in the Garden, God's placement of her divinely charged light (*nur*) into the Tree of Life,

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her status as the source of the lights of prophecy and the Imamate, and her eternal virginity (*al-batul*) and purity (*al-tahirah*). Such stories elevate Fatimah to a sublime status and mark Fatimah's body as being exceptionally different from the earthly body of Eve (and all other women). Beginning in the tenth century, triangulated stories such as that of Adam and Eve's encounters with Fatimah were creatively deployed to substantiate "religio-political claims" of Shiʿism's doctrinal and theological legitimacy and the authority of institution of the Imamate (Klemm 2005: 183). These narratives explicitly focused on the exceptional qualities of Fatimah's mythical and corporeal bodies.

THE EXCEPTIONAL AND THE ABJECT BODY IN THE SHIʿI RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION

Imagination lies at the center of this analysis of Shiʿi hagiographical and speculative discourse on Fatimah's exceptional body. The imagination plays a vitally important role in the creative enterprise of hagiographical and speculative-theological writing. In her study of dreams and the religious imagination, Amira Mittermaier quotes Shaykh Qusi's explanation of the generative role of the imagination in religious life: "If you imagine a friend, you can bring him into presence, even if he's not there. You have to use your imagination. You have to imagine the Prophet and the Prophet's companions. You imagine what they were like and what it was like to live at their time. Then, through your imagination, you make them real. They're around you" (Mittermaier 2010: 18). The imagination makes Fatimah into a "real" person, especially in hagiographical narratives on her heavenly encounter with Adam and Eve, and the exceptionally close relationship she had with her father.

Fatimah is portrayed in Shiʿi hagiographical and theological narratives through an alignment of the imaginary and the symbolic aspects of her myriad bodily manifestations. Fatimah's narrators repeatedly mark her supernatural body in pre-Creation and post-apocalyptic Paradise as exceptional in its radiance, piety, and extra-corporeality (body beyond body). The numerous encounters that Adam and Eve have with Fatimah—as they boast about the greatness of their created bodies and are introduced to and overwhelmed by Fatimah in pre-Creation, and later when they eat from the Tree of Life charged with her divine light, thus causing the tree to bleed—reinforce the fundamental ontological difference between Fatimah (symbolizing the sanctity, purity, and infallibility of the Imamate) and God's other human creations.

The Shiʿi religious imagination produces Fatimah's exceptional body through discourse on the abjection of Eve's body after being expelled

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along with Adam from the Garden. Paul Cooey writes, "The body metaphorically understood as a land of emotions suggests an ambiguity of the body as a site for and artifact of the human imagination, as well as human ambivalence toward the body . . . [which] forces the question of the relation between the imagining, 'bodied' subject, and the body imagined" (Cooey 1994: 42). In this article I explore the ways in which the female bodies of Eve and Fatimah serve as the site of religious imagination, the locus of ambivalence about the female bodies. In the logic of this imagination, Eve's body signifies abjection through her bleeding, childbearing body, and Fatimah is the embodied expression of Shiʿi theology.

Fatimah's body is defined and constructed out of its exceptional difference from that of all other women. In both her earthly and transcendent forms, Fatimah's female body is a site of difference. The female body is marked as different because she "has ovaries and a uterus; such are the particular conditions that lock her in her subjectivity" (de Beauvoir 2009: 5). Simone de Beauvoir contrasts the female body that is reduced to her reproductive organs with the man who "forgets" his anatomy, and who "grasps his body as a direct and normal link with the world that he believes he apprehends in all objectivity" (2009: 5). De Beauvoir casts the male body as the neutral site of reality, where it is imagined that consciousness of the body is transcended. The female, however, is trapped in a body that is conditioned and governed by her ovaries and uterus.

Fatimah's earthly body does not conform to de Beauvoir's assessment of women's ontological reality. According to Klemm, "In order to metamorphose Fatima into a superhuman woman, her female bodily functions and sexuality are removed" (Klemm 2005: 201). Fatimah remained in a state of perpetual ritual purity because she never menstruated or performed sexual intercourse in order to become pregnant with her children, and she gave birth from the side of her body and never bled during childbirth. Did Fatimah's body undergo some sort of transgendering in the Shiʿi religious imagination? Is Fatimah an "honorary man" because she did not menstruate and her pregnancies were unconventional, even disembodied?

As the *mother* of prophecy and the *mother* of the Imamate, and more simply, a *mother* to her children, Fatimah's maternal role is obviously gendered feminine. The Shiʿa exalt Fatimah as the ideal Muslim woman: a good wife, mother, and daughter, whose piety and commitment to social justice is to be emulated. Fatimah is not an "honorary man." De Beauvoir's characterization of the neutrality of the male body and the difference of the female body is destabilized in the Shiʿi religious imagination of Fatimah's body. Fatimah is not reduced to her reproductive organs because they do not conform to human physiology, but she is

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certainly not a man. The male religious thinkers who engaged with Fatimah's body, however, while being mindful and placing great importance on its feminine-coded gender roles, used her body to explain Shiʿi doctrine. Fatimah's body is different because it is female, and it is exceptional because it is the means by which the Shiʿi vision of reality is expressed as sacred history in which Fatimah's divine light (coded feminine) is ontologically prior to and the source of prophecy and the Imamate.

In the Shiʿi religious imagination, Eve is the absolute *Other* to Fatimah's exceptionally different body. Eve's status as a "failed woman and enemy" of the *ahl-e bait* was amplified in the Shiʿi religious imagination and was set up as the abject opposite of Fatimah, whose female bodily functions were absent, and who is portrayed as the perfect Muslim woman: "The *caring* mother of her two sons, the *satisfied* wife, and the housewife who works herself to *exhaustion*" (Klemm 2005: 200). In contrast, Eve's body is defined by and reduced to her reproductive organs that bleed monthly and in childbirth. Eve's body is a source of ritual pollution that causes Adam to have intercourse with her only when she is purified of her menstrual blood, an act following which both must perform lustrations (*ghusl*) to fully cleanse their bodies.

In its female *otherness*, Eve's body is defined by its abject rootedness in its reproductive organs. In her study of abjection, Julia Kristeva established the difference between the normal (unsexed) male body and its possibility of attaining the holy, and the sexed (female) body that is rooted in its own deficient nature:

> The body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic. In order to confirm that, it should endure no gash other than that of circumcision, equivalent to sexual separation and/or separation from the mother. Any other mark would be the sign of belonging to the impure, the non-separate, the non-symbolic, the non-holy (Kristeva 1982: 102).

Eve's abjection is based on her inability to separate herself from her marks of womanhood: her vagina, her status as a mother, and her status as object devoid of its own subjectivity.

Kristeva argues that everything which is the "'natural' maternal" is deprived of its agency because it is impure and a source of ritual pollution. In both the Sunni and Shiʿi schools of Islamic law, there is an extensive corpus of jurisprudence that addresses the minutiae of ritual purity (*taharah*), especially with regard to menstruation, parturition, and even the relative im/purity of a mother's breast milk (Reinhart 1990: 7). After eating from the Tree, God punished Eve for her transgression against his

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command, which was expanded and rendered more egregious in the Shiʿi religious imagination for her aggression against Fatimah. Eve's abjection becomes centered on her body's reproductive organs that now bleed and produce children painfully. Like Fatimah, Eve is also a mother, however, childbearing is a difficult labor for her, and the Israʾiliyyat abounds with stories of how Eve colluded with Satan in the naming of one of her sons ʿAbd al-Harith ("slave of the ploughman," one of Satan's names that also symbolizes Adam's earthly punishment for which he must till the earth for his food), for which she is condemned for committing *shirk* (worshipping another being other than God), causing her son to die. In the Shiʿi religious imagination this is another example of Eve's hostility toward the *ahl-e bait,* and the fundamental difference between her abject earthly body, and Fatimah's exceptionally different body.

A NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK OF STORIES ABOUT FATIMAH AND THE TREE

Much attention is devoted to Fatimah's heavenly conception in the Shiʿi religious imagination. In this section I offer a frame narrative that synthesizes the ways in which Fatimah's exceptionally different body has been imaginatively emplotted in religious narratives. When Muhammad returned to earth from his supernatural night journey through the heavens (*miʿraj*), the Angel Gabriel[1] instructed the Prophet to abstain from having sexual intercourse with Khadijah for 40 days. At the culmination of this period of marital celibacy, the Angel Gabriel returns and instructs the Prophet and his wife to have sexual intercourse, germinating the heavenly seed residing in Muhammad's body (Ordoni 1987: 42). During her pregnancy, Khadijah's body radiates the heavenly perfume that was transferred to Fatimah's body upon birth (Bilgrami n.d.: 10). This heavenly conception and birth affirms that, "Fatimah is not like the children of Adam" (al-Haythami 1934, 9: 202). Despite the exceptionally supernatural qualities of Fatimah's conception and birth, Adam and Eve's fall from the Garden was necessary in order for prophecy and the Imamate to be initiated so that humanity could know God.

Fatimah's conception is not only supernatural but it is also imagined in Shiʿi literature as a form of self-generation. When God created the divine lights of the family of the Prophet Muhammad (ʿAli, Fatimah,

[1]In *Bait al-ahzan* (House of Sorrows), Shaykh ʿAbbas al-Qommi (d. 760/1359) quotes Majlisi's account of Muhammad's abstinence following his *miʿraj*, in which it is God who commands the Prophet to spend the next 40 days in separation from Khadijah and to spend each day fasting and to pass each night in prayer (al-Qommi 1964: 19).

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Hasan, and Husain), Fatimah bowed down before God to worship him and celebrate his absolute Oneness (*tawhid*). Pleased with Fatimah's devotion, God installed her light into the Tree of Life where it remained until the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven and was instructed to eat the fruit of the Tree in order to conceive Fatimah.

Shiʿi narratives emphasize Fatimah's body as the generative source of God's divine effulgence (*nur muhammadi*). Uri Rubin notes that:

> Some Shiʿi traditions lay a special stress on the primordial substance of Fatima as being created from the Divine light. A tradition explaining Fatima's surname al-Zahra (the luminous), states that she was created from Godly light, illuminating heaven and earth and dazzling the eyes of the angels, who prostrated themselves to this light. Allah announced that he was about to make this light manifest in the earthly world, through the loins of Muhammad. Fatima was even believed to be the first origin for the light that was transmitted through the loins of her descendents, the Imams (Rubin 1975: 102).

Here Rubin refers to a tradition about Fatimah's body as the site (and source) of the commingled lights of prophecy and the Imamate (*majmaʿ al-nurain*). Rubin cites this tradition from the *ʿIlal al-sharaʾiʿ* (The Laws Explained) of Ibn Babawayh al-Qommi (d. 381/991), in whose writings "the Fatima legend, in its essential characteristics, already [found] its completion" (Klemm 2005: 197). This concatenation of *hadiths* deserves special attention, for they identify Fatimah as the generative light of prophecy and the Imamate.

Fatimah's primordial light was infused into Adam's loins and transmitted from one prophet and Imam to the next until it was returned to Muhammad's body when he ate from the Tree of Life. This divine light is also passed from Fatimah and ʿAli into the Imams, making Fatimah not only the mother of her father, the mother of prophecy, but also of the esoteric Imamate. Fatimah is the confluence of the two lights of prophecy and the Imamate; she is the *majmaʿ al-nurain*, the confluence of exoteric prophecy and the esoteric Imamate. As the source of the lines of prophecy and Imamate, Fatimah's absolute purity is of paramount importance in the Shiʿi religious imagination.

A SHINING WONDER IN THE GARDEN: ADAM AND EVE ENCOUNTER FATIMAH

Through a series of interlocking Adamic narratives, we can move closer to understanding Fatimah's exceptionally different body, describing

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her as a *houri* in human form, from whose pre-created light (*nur*), prophecy and the Imamate was born. Fatimah is identified by a series of epithets (*alqab*) describing her exceptional body, including the radiant (*al-zahra*), the pure (*al-tahirah*), and the virgin (*al-batul*). I examine how Fatimah's body has been constructed as exceptional in the religious imagination in four different narrative threads linking her to Adam and Eve.

The first narrative focuses on Adam and Eve's encounter with "the best of the women of the two worlds" (*sayyidat nisaʾ al-ʿalamain*) in the atomistic world of pre-Creation (*ʿalam-e zarr*) where Fatimah resides in luminously transcendent splendor (Massignon 1963: 582–583). In a tradition based upon the authority of the eleventh Imam Hasan al-ʿAskari (d. 260/874), the Prophet Adam's encounter with Fatimah's divine radiance sets in motion the beginnings of prophetic history. This narrative is derived from *al-Batul* (The Virgin), a hagiography written by the Pakistani religious scholar, Saʾim Chishti, who prolifically writes in Urdu and Punjabi hagiographical narratives dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad's daughter and other members of the *ahl-e bait*. Chishti is not Shiʿa, but rather a [Sunni] Sufi of the Chishti *tariqah*; however, he exemplifies the deep tradition of venerating the *ahl-e bait* in Sufism. Sufis in South Asia and Iran have traditionally venerated Imam Husain as the consummate, self-annihilating lover of God (*muhibb*), and in particular, the Chishtiyya have venerated the Imams as the spiritual heirs to the Prophet Muhammad (Ruffle 2011: 152).

Chishti's *al-Batul* is deeply intertextual, creatively appropriating and reorganizing Sunni (al-Tabari's *Tarikh*) and Shiʿi (Majlisi's *Bihar al-anwar* [Oceans of Lights] and Mullah Husain Vaʿez Kashefi's (1979) *Rowzat al-Shohada*[2] [Garden of the Martyrs]) sources, and absorbing the specifically Pakistani cultural values and norms of the author. In the following synopsis of Chishti's description of Adam and Eve's encounter with Fatimah in Heaven, the folksy tone of the narrative and its concern for Fatimah's marital status "grips the reader or listener. It encourages people to use their own imagination and it makes the exemplary nature of past events merge in their own hearts" (Günther 1998: 469).

In *al-Batul*, Chishti draws upon an account narrated by Jabir ibn ʿAbdallah on the authority of the eleventh Imam, Hasan al-ʿAskari, which is cited in the *Lisan al-mizan* of the Egyptian Shafiʿi Sunni scholar Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalani (d. 852/1448), in which Adam learns that Fatimah's generative radiance is pre-eternal and the source of prophecy

[2]For an extended discussion of the question of Kashefi's sectarian identity, see Ruffle (2011: 150–152). In this article he is treated as an ostensibly Shiʿi author.

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and the Imamate, and all of its qualities. According to this narrative, Adam and Eve were lounging about in the Garden marveling at the wondrousness of their created bodies. God heard Adam's boasting and sent the Angel Gabriel to bring Adam and Eve before Fatimah, who was seated on a golden sofa. Astonished and overwhelmed by Fatimah's radiance, Adam approached God and asked the identity of this superlatively beautiful woman. God declared that she is "Fatimah, the daughter of Muhammad (May God bless her and grant her peace)" (Chishti 2005: 355). Then, Chishti perhaps unintentionally inserts a bit of levity into this cosmically momentous encounter: Adam inquires, "Oh God! Who is her husband?" (2005: 356). Significantly, Eve vanishes from the narrative at this point, foreshadowing her hostility toward Fatimah, which will culminate in her plucking fruit from the Tree and making it bleed. Gabriel takes Adam to another part of heaven, where a handsome young man is found reclining on a golden sofa. Adam is informed that this is ʿAli, who will be Fatimah's husband in the created world. This tour around the heaven of pre-Creation reveals to Adam that there are beings even more delightful and majestic than he:

> Having visited this sacred pair Hazrat Adam (peace be upon him) returned, and in being exposed to the delightfulness and beauty of their [Fatimah and ʿAli's] unity, a powerful feeling issued forth from his heart (Chishti 2005: 356).

Of particular interest in this narrative is Adam's absolute awe of Fatimah. Dumbstruck he implores God to tell him the name of this resplendently luminous woman. Surely a woman of such magnificence must be married, and God affirms that Fatimah is married in heaven to ʿAli and that their wedding will be replicated in the earthly world. In numerous traditions Muhammad attests that God has commanded that Fatimah and ʿAli join together in marriage. In *Bihar al-anwar,* the poverty of the earthly wedding celebration of Fatimah and ʿAli is contrasted with the lavish festivities commanded by God upon the angels and *houris*. The heavens are decorated and the *houris* recited verses from *surahs* Ta Ha (*surah* 20), al-Naml (*surah* 27), and Ya Sin (*surah* 36), and God called out from the Throne (*ʿarsh*) proclaiming the earthly marriage of this celestially united couple (Majlisi 1983: 101–102). In her essay on the process of image formation in the hagiographical and historical traditions that have developed around Fatimah in the Arabic tradition, Verena Klemm aptly observes in her summary of Majlisi's narrative that Fatimah's story "exceeds its earthly setting." Moreover,

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> Through the reference to the so-called secret letters Ta Ha . . . Tawasin . . . Ya Sin . . . there unfolds the entire course of divine creation and revelation for anyone knowledgeable in the Quran: the creation of the cosmos, the sun, the moon, the earth, plants, animals and human life, Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise . . . the mission of Muhammad, the significance of the Quran, the Islamic order willed by God, the rewarding of believers, punishment for infidels, the resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgment, and Paradise and Hell. *In this way, the entire Fatima story is tied into the entire cosmic universe and sacred history of Islam* (Klemm 2005: 198–199, italics mine).

Fatimah's marriage is another affirmation of her supernatural heavenly role that establishes her relationship to her father and ʿAli, yet it is her exalted position vis-à-vis God and the Qurʾan that distinctly sets her apart.

Chishti quotes at length this tradition about Adam encountering the Prophet Muhammad's daughter in the heavens of pre-Creation. Expanding upon the tradition, Chishti engages Adam's voice in a poetic encomium describing the qualities and virtues of the descendents from "Fatimah's house" (Chishti 2005: 356):

> From the house of Fatimah is wa[i]layat,
>
> From the house of Fatimah is Imamate.

The first two qualities emanating from the house of Fatima is that of *wa/ilayah* (transcendent sainthood [*walayah*] and imitable sainthood [*wilayah*]) and the Imamate. Because vowel markings are not indicated in the Urdu script, both *walayah* and *wilayah* can be inferred, both of which are theologically possible. As I have theorized elsewhere, *walayah* can be paired with its analogue, "Imamate," to reflect transcendent sainthood and the divinely bestowed role of guiding humanity in Islam and the law (Ruffle 2011: 46–49). *Wilayah* is a quality of sainthood that is based upon the social recognition of an individual as a religious exemplar and a role model of idealized socio-ethical behavior. In the following lines of the poem, the qualities that Chishti associates with the "house of Fatimah" both reflect the transcendent and imitable aspects of Fatimah, her father, and the Imams. *Walayah* is manifested by the "house of Fatimah" in the qualities of guidance (*hidayat*), vice-regency (*niyabat*), intercession (*shafaʿat*), Paradise (*jannat*), prophecy (*nubuwwah*), and Messengership (*risalat*). The imitable aspects of *wilayah* embodied by the "house of Fatimah" are martyrdom (*shahadat*), valor (*shajaʿat*), fidelity (*sadaqat*),

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compassion (*rahmat*), comfort (*rahat*), and generosity (*sakhavat*) (Chishti 2005: 356–7).

This poem in which Adam extols the transcendent and imitable qualities of the "house of Fatimah" is concluded with a didactic coda encapsulating the totality of their transcendent guidance and embodiment of the Islamic religio-ethical exemplar:

> It goes without saying that it is Janab-e Sayyidah Fatimah al-Zahra's house upon which place the foundations of religion are set in order, whence the regulations of Islam are issued. Whence the divine rule is set forth. Whence the creatures of the universe obtain the lessons of life. Whence the convoluted road of life obtains guidance. Whence the station of the best of humanity is indicated. Moreover, upon which the station of *shariʿah*, religion, and truth, and wisdom is perfected (Chishti 2005: 357).

Chishti cleverly weaves together Sunni *hadith*, Shiʿi hagiography, and poetic praise (*manqabat*) of Fatimah and her lineage. This imaginative account of Adam learning of Fatimah in the "atomistic world" of pre-Creation (*ʿalam-e zarr*) is critically important for understanding Fatimah and her progeny's transcendent qualities, which set them apart from the rest of humanity.

COMMINGLING OF CLAY AND WATER: THE EARTHLINESS OF THE ADAMIC CREATION

In the Shiʿi religious imagination, Fatimah is identified as the source of the initiatic knowledge with which the Imams are endowed. The ability to know and possess knowledge, both manifest and esoteric, is the faculty that God gave only to human beings. The first revelation that the Prophet Muhammad received reveals the primacy that God places upon the rational knowledge (*ʿaql*) of human beings:

> Recite in the name of your Lord Who created
>
> He created humanity from a clot.
>
> Recite! And your Lord is Most Honorable.
>
> He Who taught with the Pen,
>
> He taught humanity that which it does not know (Qur'an 96: 1–5).

When God created humankind, he instructed Adam, the primordial man, in the names of the things He had created. Verse five of God's first

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revelation to Muhammad attests that all human knowledge is the result of Divine Will. Adam learned the substance of God's creation through his prophetic wisdom and human faculty of *ʿaql*. Adam's being and knowledge, which is theologically and ontologically actualized through the Fall, is secondary to God's primary creation: Muhammad, Fatimah, and ʿAli. According to one tradition, Muhammad, Fatimah, and ʿAli were created fifteen thousand years before Adam, and they hovered around the Throne of God (*ʿarsh*) in the form of light (*nur*). Upon creating Adam, God infused his loins with the light of Muhammad, Fatimah, and ʿAli. This tradition explains that, "Adam was a mere vehicle (*wuʿa*) carrying this substantial light; therefore, it is often stressed that the light of the Ahl al-Bayt was the only cause for the prostration of the angels to him" (Rubin 1975: 100; Majlisi 1983, 11: 192). Although God demanded the angels to bow down before his human creation, Adam's very createdness from an admixture of water and earth is inferior to the radiant light that constitutes the core of Fatimah, Muhammad, and ʿAli. Although Adam possesses *ʿaql*, he only learns of God's Creation through Divine Will, whereas the divine effulgence (*nur*) embodied by Fatimah and her progeny contains the core of God's creation, which is the source of their esoteric and initiatic knowledge. Bearing this light (*nur*) inculcates the infallibility (*ʿismah*) of the twelve Imams, Fatimah, and Muhammad. Furthermore, this *nur* marks Fatimah's absolute purity, exempting her from menstruating and the impurity of parturition: Fatimah is human, but not in the Adamic sense.

In a *hadith* based on the authority of ʿAli, "the creation of Muhammad's light was prior to the creation of the human race. When Adam was created [God] invested him with the light. When Allah allowed the transmission of this light He made Adam and Eve copulate" (Rubin 1975: 109). When Adam and Eve were cast out from the Garden, they did not immediately understand the reproductive function of their genitals, let alone the pleasure that can be experienced from sexual activity. The early Muslim historian Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373) narrates: "Adam did not have sex with his wife while in the garden, until he fell from there on account of the sin of eating from the tree. Both of them slept alone. They slept on the open ground next to each other until Gabriel came and commanded Adam to produce his family. Gabriel taught him how to produce it. After Adam had sex with Eve, Gabriel asked, 'How did you find your wife'? He said: 'Upright'" (Wheeler 2004: 101–102). Adam and Eve become fully human and fallible through their genital functions that are awakened upon eating from the tree of knowledge.

After being expelled from the Garden and taught by the Angel Gabriel how to have sexual intercourse, Adam and Eve discovered the

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impurity of their bodies. When Adam wanted to have sexual intercourse with Eve, he would order her to perform ablutions (*wudu*) in order to protect his light, *nur* (the divine effulgence of Muhammad, ʿAli, and Fatimah) from her impure body (Rubin 1975: 92). Adam and Eve's fall from the Garden was necessitated by the lines of prophecy (*nubuwwah*) and the Imamate being brought into reality, serving as guides for humankind that God created with the ability to possess rational knowledge (*ʿaql*).

Fatimah's honorific titles (*kunya*), "the mother of her father" (*umm abiha*) and "the mother of the Imamate" (*umm al-aʾimma*), are the antipode of the profane sexual intercourse taught to Adam and Eve, causing human beings to exist in a constant state of ritual pollution (Wheeler 2004: 100). According to Muslim interpretations of Adam and Eve's fall, although both were expelled from the Garden, the taint of ritual impurity is firmly placed upon Eve, who is made to menstruate and suffer the pain of childbirth as a result of her sinful act. Eve's punishment is corroborated by the qurʾanic declaration that the pains of childbirth and the impurity of menstruation are the lot of women: "They ask you concerning menstruation. Say: 'It is an illness. So keep away from women in their courses, and do not approach them until they are clean'" (Qur'an 2: 222). We find another explanation of Eve's bodily punishment in the form of ritual pollution in al-Tabari's *tafsir* on the authority of Ibn Zayd (d. 53/673), one of the Companions (*Sahabah*) of the Prophet Muhammad:

> When God asked what had caused his trouble, he replied, Eve, my Lord. Whereupon God said: Now it is My obligation to make her bleed once every month, as she made this tree bleed. I also must make her stupid, although I created her intelligent (*halimah*), and must make her suffer pregnancy and birth with difficulty, although I made it easy for her to be pregnant and give birth. Ibn Ziyad continued: Were it not for the affliction that affected Eve, the women of this world would not menstruate, and they would be intelligent and, when pregnant, give birth easily (al-Tabari 1989: 280–281).

Eve's punishment, while harsh in comparison to that meted out by God to Adam sets up, albeit not in al-Tabari's own narrative, an ontological opposition in the purity and sinlessness of Fatimah al-Zahra's exceptional body. While the light (*nur muhammadi*) of prophecy and Imamate is transferred from Adam through the prophetic lineage, ultimately being restored in the body of Muhammad, Fatimah's light-filled body remains complete and pure.

This narrative of Adam and Eve learning to procreate and populate the earthly world sharply contrasts with the supernatural conception of

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Fatimah. In this section, I outline the two most common narratives in the Shiʿi hagiographical tradition describing Fatimah's conception. While both reflect aspects of the supernatural, Majlisi's account offers considerably more detail. First is the generic frame narrative that describes the Prophet's night journey to heaven (*miʿraj*), where he ate the heavenly apple (or date) that Muhammad himself described as becoming the "water of my loins" (*maʾ fi sulbi*), the seed of Fatimah's earthly conception (Amir-Moezzi 1994: 57).

EATING THE APPLE OF MYSTICAL LIGHT FROM THE TREE OF LIFE

In the Muslim religious imagination the Prophet Muhammad's night journey (*miʿraj*) was more than a mystical ascent through the seven heavens, where he met the prophets of revelatory history and came within "two bow lengths" of God (Qur'an 53: 8–9). In *Anwar-e zahra* (The Lights of the Radiant), a hagiography of Fatimah by the Iranian Ayatollah Sayyid Hasan Abtahi, there is an account of the Prophet's ascent in which he describes the heavenly bestowing of sanctified semen to create Fatimah's earthly, yet exceptional body:

> On that night of the *miʿraj*, Gabriel descended and he gave to me a fruit of the heavenly tree. Fatimah was born from the heavenly fruit. Now, whenever I want to smell the scent of heaven, I clasp Fatimah's (*salam Allah ʿalayha* [may God's blessing be upon her]) neck, and I would smell the heavenly apple's fragrance. My daughter is a human *houri*; pollution can never approach her . . . Hazrat Fatimah Zahra (S.A.) came into the world pure and undefiled by the hidden and manifest impurities of womankind. In contrast to the other women of the world, Hazrat was free from any kind of impurity. The greatest of the messengers (*mursal-e aʿzam*) used to inhale her heavenly scent (Abtahi 1989: 16).

In this passage Abtahi clearly separates Fatimah from all earthly women who are like Eve and exist in a state of perpetual impurity. Although Fatimah was born into an earthly body, it is merely an illusion, for her corporeality is actually in the form of a heavenly *houri*. Describing Fatimah as a "human *houri*" doubly marks her body as exceptional. First, Fatimah is a heavenly being in a human body. Second, as a human *houri*, Fatimah is not merely *like* a "virgin of Paradise"; she is the primordial virgin.

Houris are virginal maidens of incomparable sensuality with faces that glow red, yellow, green, or white (Rustomji 2009: 111). The scents of

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musk, saffron, and camphor radiate from their heavenly bodies (Rustomji 2009: 111). The Qurʾan promises that the reward for men in Paradise will be: "Maidens chaste, restraining their glances, whom no man or *jinn* before them has touched" (55: 56; see also 37: 48–49; 38: 52; 56: 22–23, 35–36). Popular media in Europe and North America have fetishized the *houri* through the portrayal of Muslim men going off to meet certain death on the battlefield (the Iran-Iraq war), or blowing themselves up in suicide bombing missions, as being validated and libidinously inspired by the reward of seventy-two heavenly virgins for their act of martyrdom. Nowhere in the Qurʾan is this heavenly reward mentioned, rather its first reference appears in Book Four of Muhammad ibn ʿIsa al-Tirmidhi's ninth-century *hadith* collection *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, which attributes to the Prophet Muhammad: "The smallest reward for the people of Heaven is an abode where there are eighty thousand servants and seventy-two *houris*, over which stands a dome decorated with pearls, aquamarine and ruby, as wide as the distance from al-Jabiyyah to Sanʿa" (Book 4, chapter 21, *hadith* no. 2687).

This libidinized aspect of the portrayal of the *houri* obscures Fatimah's status as a *houri* in human form. If Fatimah is a virgin, undefiled by any of the "external and internal" purities such as menstruation and parturition that mark a woman's ritual impurity, then the sexualized portrayal of the *houri* is misleading and incorrect. Fatimah's portrayal as a *houri* in human form emphasizes her supernatural body, whose heavenly qualities can only be perceived by those who understand. If we are to believe Henri Lammens' negative description of Fatimah's physical qualities and personality traits, then her sublime, heavenly form becomes even more profoundly veiled. In *Fatima et les filles de mohamet* (Fatima and the Daughters of Muhammad), Henri Lammens described Fatimah as, "a woman devoid of attraction, of mediocre intelligence, completely insignificant, little esteemed by her father, ill-treated by her husband . . . anaemic, often ill, [and] prone to tears" (Veccia-Vaglieri 1991, 2: 841; Lammens 1912: 17). Frederick M. Donner has criticized Lammens' use of source material from the early Muslim community, which he used to portray "Fatima in a bad light, partly in reaction to the exaggerated honor paid to her by traditions of the Kufan school" (1998: 20). Echoing Eve's hostility to Fatimah that figures in the Shiʿi religious imagination, Donner cites Carl Heinrich Becker's assessment that Lammens sought "to discredit the whole family of the Prophet" by writing books such as *Fatima et les filles de mohamet* in order to prove the supremacy of Christianity (Donner 1998: 22). Lammens' description of Fatimah further demonstrates the central role that the imagination plays in how religious

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narratives are fictively emplotted in order to legitimize religious and political claims (Donner 1998: 117).

The plainness of Fatimah's features or the weakness of her earthly body is immaterial, for she possesses the breath of heaven and in contradiction to Lammens' assessment that the Prophet held his daughter in low regard, it is she who Shiʿi hagiographers portray as her father's spiritual companion: "Because Hazrat Fatimah was the beloved of the Messenger of Islam Hazrat Muhammad Mustafa (S.A.), she was a confederate [co-partner] in Islam. The writers representing all of the schools of thought are in agreement and in the Sunni and Shiʿi books it has been entered that Hazrat Fatimah (A.S.) was the complete likeness of her great father" (Abtahi 1989: 17). Abtahi's assertion is accurate to a degree; however, the following narrative explaining Fatimah's heavenly conception complicates and further establishes Fatimah as *umm abiha* through her status as the confluence of the two lights (*majmaʿ al-nurain*).

The story about Muhammad's consumption of the heavenly fruit is elaborated upon in the Shiʿi scholar Husain ʿAbd al-Wahhab's *ʿUyun al-Muʿjizat*, an eleventh-century Arabic compendium of *hadith* recounting the miracles of the Imams and Fatimah, and the story becomes intertwined with a second narratological strand that connects Fatimah's *nur* (divine radiance) to the Tree of Life from which her father consumed while on the *miʿraj*. The celestial apple is none other than Fatimah, who was first created as light. In her eternal awareness of God (*taqwa*), Fatimah in her luminous disembodied form gave praise (*al-tahlil*) and glory (*al-tamjid*) to God (ʿAbd al-Wahhab 2004: 56). Pleased with Fatimah, God infused her light into the Tuba tree (the Tree of Life). When Muhammad ascended through the seven heavens on the *miʿraj*, this narrative asserts that it was God who instructed the Prophet to eat from the fruit of this tree, which he did. In a surreal narratological turn, the juice of the celestial fruit (Fatimah) is (simultaneously?) drunk by ʿAli and infused into the loins of Muhammad. When Muhammad returned to Mecca, this light-infused fluid was transferred to Khadijah's womb until she gave birth to Fatimah (see also Veccia-Vaglieri 1991, 2: 847; ʿAbd al-Wahhab 2004: 57).

The first narrative, where during the *miʿraj* Muhammad consumes a heavenly fruit that is the seed of Fatimah's earthly yet exceptional body is in itself miraculous (*muʿjizah*), yet it is the second account of Fatimah's conception that links her being to Adam and Eve and to her dual status as *umm abiha* (the mother of her father) and *umm al-aʾimma* (mother of the Imamate). The narrative of light and the Tree of Life consolidates Fatimah's earthly and transcendent qualities in her being the *majmaʿ al-nurain*, the confluence of the exoteric light of prophecy and the

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esoteric, hidden light of the Imamate. This narrative affirms Rubin's observation that, "Fatima was even believed to be the first origin for the light that was transmitted through the loins of her descendents, the Imams" (Rubin 1975: 102). Conceiving of Fatimah as the origin of light animating prophecy and Imamate, one is reminded of the hackneyed rhetorical ontological question: "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" Abtahi's assertion that Fatimah was the complete likeness of her father does not adhere in this light narrative. Fatimah's light precedes her father resting in the Tree of Life until he ascends to the heavens. The simultaneous infusion of her light into her father's loins and her husband's throat symbolically confirms her role as the confluence of two lights: the light of prophecy issues forth from her father Muhammad and the light of the Imamate from her husband ʿAli, yet both initially reside in *her* body and are comprised of Fatimah's light.

The second key element in this narrative of light is based on the fact that God placed Fatimah's light into the Tree of Life, which Eve injured when she ate of its fruit. In his exegesis (*tafsir*) of the Qurʾan, Muhammad ibn Ishaq (d. 150/767), one of the earliest biographers of the Prophet, and whose writings have found appeal for both Sunni and Shiʿi scholars alike, described Adam and Eve's temptation before the Tree of Life:

> Satan made his first attempt to trick Adam and Eve by mourning for them in a way that saddened them when they heard it. When they asked him what it was that made him cry, he replied: "I am crying for you. You will die and be forced to give up the luxury and generous plenty you are enjoying." This remark made a deep impression on them. Next, he went to them and whispered, saying, "Adam, may I lead you to the tree of eternity and a rule that never decays?" He (also) said: "Your Lord has only forbidden you this tree, lest you become angels or live eternally . . . " God says: "And he thus hooked them with deceit" (al-Tabari 1989: 280).

This passage contextualizes and expands upon the Qurʾanic account of Satan's temptation of Adam: "O Adam, shall I show you the tree of immortality and power that does not waste away?" (20: 120). Ironically, in this passage, it is not Eve who succumbs to Satan's beguiling words promising eternal life by eating the fruit of the Tree of Life (Thurlkill 2007: 85). Adam was the one who was tempted by the promise of becoming like the angels and living forever. Yet it is upon Eve's body that God inscribed his punishment causing her to bleed each month just as she caused the Tree to shed its blood.

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Adam was not punished for being an inherently sinful person. When Adam repented before God, He did not curse the person of Adam, but the earth from which he was created, and to which he and Eve were consigned to toil for their food, clothing, and shelter. In the *Qisas al-anbiya*, al-Thaʿlabi describes Adam's Fall as part of God's divine plan for which he made "them responsible for themselves," and they *chose* to eat "what was forbidden to them" (al-Thaʿlabi 2002: 52). Al-Thaʿlabi's explanation raises the question of free-will and predestination (*qadr*) and whether Adam and Eve actually did choose to eat from the Tree. The answer to this question is provided by al-Thaʿlabi, who affirmed that "God expelled Adam from the Garden before He brought him into it, for that is what He says: '*I am about to place a viceroy on Earth*' (2:30), and He did not say" 'in the Garden'" (al-Thaʿlabi 2002: 53). In al-Thaʿlabi's religious imagination, God had planned to expel Adam from the Garden so that he could initiate the light of prophecy and bring the message of monotheism (*tawhid*) to humanity.

Adam's exoneration results in the punishment for their transgression against God being firmly placed on Eve's body, turning it into the site of abjection. Eve's punishment for her eating from the Tree was multifold: God transformed Eve from being an intelligent (*halimah*) being into one who is stupid, she will menstruate each month and suffer in childbirth. In his *Tafsir* of the Qurʾan, the twelfth-century Shiʿi scholar al-Tabarsi cites on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbas (d. 67/687), one of the Prophet Muhammad's companions and an authority on Islamic law, who said that, "When Adam passed on the blame for eating of the tree to Eve, God cursed her by saying, 'I have caused her as a result not to bear children except against her wish!'" (al-Tabarsi, 8: 144, cited in Smith and Haddad 1982: 140). Moreover, if Eve had not transgressed against God's lone prohibition issued to her and Adam, all women would be intelligent, be free from the polluting effects of menstruation and parturition, and they would give birth without struggle.

In the Shiʿi religious imagination, the disproportionate punishment meted out to Eve is less about her eating the forbidden fruit than it is about her act of violence toward Fatimah, whose light resides within the Tree. Eve's jealousy of Fatimah is a prominent theme in Shiʿi emplotments of Israʾiliyyat literature, and her plucking fruit from the Tree is much more than transgression of God's divine decree. Eve has violated Fatimah's exceptionally pure body that exists as light (*nur*) in the Tree, and it is for this act that the Shiʿi narratives imagine that God punished Eve with the "curse" of menstruation: "As for you, O Hawwaʾ, as you have bled this tree so shall you bleed every month! (al-Tabarsi, 8: 143; cited in Smith and Haddad 1982: 140). By plucking the fruit Eve caused the most

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grievous injury to Fatimah, whose bleeding draws one to imagine the blood of menstruation. Because Fatimah's body must maintain its absolute purity as a symbol of Shiʿi religio-political legitimacy, the physical act of menstruation is transferred to Eve's body, which in its abjection symbolizes the human struggle to conform to God's divine law. Although they are both imagined as women, Eve and Fatimah's bodies are not only physiologically different, the substance of their physical composition symbolize their abjection and exceptional difference: Eve was composed of earth and Fatimah of divine light (*nur*).

AN EVEN BETTER CREATION: FATIMAH AND DISCOURSE OF EXCEPTIONAL DIFFERENCE

Fatimah's virginal purity and her exceptional childbirth conform to religious tropes of exceptional virginity and immaculate conception, yet a tension emerges when read in conjunction with narratives about Adam and Eve's fall from the Garden and their assumption of "civilized" bodies. As the mother of the Imamate (*umm al-aʾimma*), Fatimah's epithets *al-batul* (the virgin) and *al-tahirah* (the pure) affirm the transcendence of her physical body. Fatimah is fully both a human and a heavenly creation. The Prophet described Fatimah as "a maiden of Paradise in human form" (Muttaqi 1945: 94; Veccia-Vaglieri 1991: 2: 844).

Fatimah's epithets *al-batul* and *al-tahirah* emphasize her purity and transcendence above "normal" humankind. Another of Fatimah's epithets is *Maryam al-kubra* (the greater Mary), which bodily links her to Mary who, as a virgin conceived and gave birth to Jesus. Fatimah, however, transcends even Mary in her absolute, eternal bodily purity. Like Mary mother of Jesus, Fatimah has not been made to suffer Eve's physical punishment of bodily pollution. According to a tradition narrated by the fifth Imam Muhammad Baqir: "Hazrat Fatimah Zahra (S.A.) was pure from all types of impurity. She never saw 'red sweat'[3] and never experienced parturition. For this reason she is called by the name Tahirah" (Abtahi 1989: 31). Fatimah is exempt from bleeding each month, as her light pre-existed before the creation of Adam and Eve and she is therefore free from the taint of "making the tree bleed" (Wheeler 2004: 102).

Fatimah's purity and transcendence is contrasted to Adam and Eve's transgression in eating from the tree of knowledge, especially as her radiant, pure body constitutes the confluence of the lights of prophecy

[3]"Red sweat" is a euphemistic way of referring to a woman's menstrual periods (*hayz*).

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and Imamate. Henri Corbin notes that when Fatimah was pregnant with the second and third Imams Hasan and Husain, her body was the vessel conjoining the exoteric and esoteric functions of the Imamate:

> Because the fruit of Paradise from which Fatima was born signifies the reunion of the two functions of the Imamate *(istiqrar* and *istida*). In the person of Fatima the two functions of the Imamate are combined, but they separate once more in her sons, Hasan and Husayn. . . . The two little Imams were not born of her as other children of men are born, or rather they were the children of Fatima in the physical sense *and* in the most concrete spiritual sense (*fi'l-jismaniya wa'l-ruhaniya*). Hasan issued from her left side because he *is* the *istida* and also the exoteric law to which the *ta'wil* must apply. Husain issued from her *right side* because he is the *istiqrar* and the esoteric *ta'wil*, the essential sense (*haqiqat*). In this sense (and not by virtue of a physiological process), Fatima is the *mother of the divinity* of the Imams . . . for she herself possesses a Temple of Light (Corbin 1983: 108).

Here, Corbin cites the fifteenth-century Ismaʿili historian Idris ʿImad al-Din's *Zahr al-Maʿani*, a compendium on Shiʿi beliefs and doctrines. The Ismaʿili branch of Shiʿism places Fatimah at the confluence of the lights of prophecy and the Imamate. Fatimah's heavenly conception is manifested on earth with the birth of her two sons Hasan and Husain, who represent exoteric law and esoteric, initiatic knowledge, respectively. Within Fatimah's exceptional body, she embodies the law of Islam, and she knows its deepest secrets of God.

Further marking Fatimah's body as exceptional in Idris ʿImad al-Din's imagination is its conforming to the trope of unconventional, even impossible, forms of childbirth. Like Queen Maya who gave birth to the Buddha from her side, Fatimah, too, did not vaginally give birth to the Imams. In this passage, Idris draws emphatic attention to the fact that Fatimah is the "mother of divinity," which is not the result of a corporeal physiological process. Fatimah does not possess the body of Eve (and other women).

While we may read such passages of Fatimah's virginal and pure body and accept this as being a normal feature of hagiography, a genre that is based on the exceptional individual, some may be discomfited by Eve's abjection.[4] Eve's abject body is "demonized" in the Qur'an, *hadith* and

[4]I am grateful to Maria Massi Dakake for pointing out the tensions that such discourse of exceptional difference incites in comparing Fatimah and Eve. While this analysis may raise more questions than it answers, the question of Fatimah's exceptionality and Eve's abjection is one that I intend to pursue from a more deeply feminist perspective in the next phase of my project.

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tafsir for her disobedience to God, who punished her by diminishing her intelligence, causing her to menstruate, and to suffer pain and the pollution of childbirth (Spellberg 1996: 314–19). In her study of the portrayal of Eve in the medieval Muslim exegetical tradition, Denise Spellberg cogently identifies the basis of Eve's bodily abjection as being "fused together, the centrality of female biology and Satanic temptation clarify the production of all humans, including future prophets, as a divine project" (1996: 320).

Julia Kristeva eloquently describes the potent power of abjection, which closely follows Mary Douglas's definition of danger in religious and ritual contexts:

> It is not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect border, positions, rules. The in-between, ambiguous, composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience. . . . Abjection on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it . . . (Kristeva 1982: 4).

Kristeva identifies abjection as a disruption of identity and order, a disrespect of borders and rules. Kristeva defines the abject individual as "the criminal with good conscience," which echoes the accusation that Eve caused the Tree to "bleed." The abject is an ambiguous individual who perpetually exists in a state of "in-between." One might argue that Eve's menstruating, parturient body develops ambiguity and exists in a state of "in-between" after God punishes her for her act of disobedience.

Ritual pollution and its rectification is a central concern in Islam, and Shiʿi books of jurisprudence popularly referred to as *tawzih-e masaʾel* (clarification of questions) devote considerable attention to matters of purity, especially menstruation. These books, usually authored by the highest-ranking Shiʿi scholars (*marjaʿ al-taqlid*) of the period (for example, Ayatollah ʿAli Sistani) differentiate with great care the difference between menstrual blood (*hayd*) and other types of vaginal discharge (*istehaza*), and what types of ritual prohibitions each accrues.

In his study of ritual purity and pollution in medieval jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Brannon Wheeler traces the development of Adam and Eve's civilized bodies, which through their secretions and emissions, result in a permanent state of ritual impurity that is only temporarily mitigated by ablution (*wudu*) or immersion (*ghusl*). This ritually impure body exists in a state of in-between because these polluting actions remind one of Adam and Eve's perpetual purity in the Garden, and the transformation

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of their bodies after the Fall. A. Kevin Reinhart has argued that there is nothing wrong with being impure, for one need only perform ablutions (*wudu* or *ghusl*) in order to be ritually pure (Reinhart 1990: 21). For women, however, menstruation and parturition, the symbolic markers of the abjection of Eve's body, prevent them from the possibility of ritual purity during periods of bleeding. When a woman is menstruating or during the forty days after childbirth, she is precluded from prayer, cannot perform the hajj to Mecca, and cannot fast during Ramadan. Here the religious imagination expressed in the Israʾiliyyat tradition regarding Eve's body is put into legal praxis where the female body is substantially different from the "neutral" male body that de Beauvoir described as able to imagine itself transcending its reproductive organs. In Islam, control of the female body and its pollution must be controlled—*impurity is a problem*.

If we follow Christina Mazzoni's hermeneutic model of Kristevan abjection that is read through a Christian mystical lens, we might perform an interstitial reading of Eve's abjection. Mazzoni defines transgression in the construction of abjection as:

> The crossing of the limits—which abjection, as a borderline discourse and as the underside of the neat symbolic order, is always about to carry out. It is only at the margins of mysticism, Kristeva claims, that the subtlest transgression of the law, i.e. the uttering of sin in front of God, can sound not as an indictment but rather as the glorious counterbalance of confession as the avowal of belief (Mazzoni 1991: 65–6).

Perhaps, in imitating her husband's desire to be the best of God's creation and to live immortally, Eve succumbed to Satan's temptation. Eve transgressed. She crossed the clear limit established by God, but the very act of God's mercy indicates that Eve was not acting as a "criminal with good conscience" when she ate from the Tree of Life (Kristeva 1982: 4). Reading Muslim texts recounting Eve's transgression and punishment in conjunction with parallel hagiographical and theological narratives about Fatimah, we can see that eating the fruit and making the Tree bleed was merely an act to be indicted. Rather, Eve's transgressive act is the vehicle by which Fatimah's exceptional self can be manifested in the earthly world.

CONCLUSION

Despite the proliferation of writing about bodies, bloody flows, and gendered states of (im)purity, the materiality of the female body remains lodged within patriarchal discourse and imaginaire. All of the

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hagiographical and theological writing to which I refer in this article are men imagining women's bodies. They write about the most intimate and hidden aspects of Fatimah and Eve's bodies—their pregnant and (non) menstruating bodies. *Sensible Ecstasy*, Amy Hollywood's study of how twentieth-century French philosophers have engaged in their writing and thought with ecstatic, embodied, and gendered aspects of medieval Christian mysticism, examines how Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray interpreted the transgressive acts of women saints as liberating models in their feminist thought. In her critique of Jacques Lacan's theory of the constitution of self and subjectivity vis-à-vis lack, Irigaray "insists that feminist philosophy must also articulate a new symbolic and a new imaginary grounded in the morphology of the body marked as female within male-dominant discourse" (Hollywood 2002: 181). According to Irigaray, it is only through a realignment of the imaginary and symbolic in the female body that women will attain subjectivity that is not based in Lacanian phallogocentrism (Hollywood 2002: 183).

Irigaray's notion of the imaginary is expressed through the exceptional and inverted father–daughter relationship and the generative light radiating from Fatimah in pre-eternity: prophets and Imams have guided humanity. The transmission of Fatimah's divine light was infused into Adam's loins and passed from prophet to prophet, culminating with the Prophet Muhammad, the seal of prophethood (*khatm al-nubuwwah*). The imaginary is fused with the symbolic in the narrative of Fatimah's miraculous conception through God's command to Muhammad to eat from the Tree of Life; the same tree that was forbidden to Adam and Eve. In both narratives, Fatimah is the symbolic and imaginary mother of her father Muhammad. Fatimah *is* the fruit of the heavenly tree. Fatimah's father eats her in order to bring forth her earthly body. In this context the feminine as disembodied ideal and marker of bodily difference enables Fatimah's full subjectivity.

In the narratives examined in this article, Fatimah presents an alignment of the imaginary and the symbolic in her myriad manifestations of her exceptionally different body. Fatimah's narrators repeatedly mark her body as exceptionally different in the atomistic world of pre-Creation (*ʿalam-e zarr*), the earthly world where she gives birth to the Imams, and in post-apocalyptic Paradise—in all three realms her body is repeatedly shown to be exceptional in its radiance, piety, absolute purity, and extra-corporeality. The numerous encounters that Adam and Eve have with Fatimah in the *ʿalam-e zarr*, and later when Eve plucked the fruit from the Tree of Life that was imbued with her divine light (*nur*), causing the Tree (that is, Fatimah) to bleed—reinforce the fundamental ontological difference between Fatimah and God's other human creations.

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Fatimah's human body is marked by four powerful symbolic markers of her exceptional difference, notably her heavenly conception, her body as the site of the confluence of the lights of exoteric prophecy and the esoteric Imamate, her absolute purity, and her perpetual virginity.

In articulating the legitimacy and authority of Shiʿi doctrine and theology, Shiʿi religious thinkers creatively engaged Israʾiliyyat literature as a source explaining Fatimah's exceptional qualities that were used to symbolize their conception of exoteric prophecy and the esoteric Imamate. As the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, and mother of the Imamate, the Shiʿa staked their claim to Fatimah by intimately and explicitly writing theology on and through her body. As a vehicle for articulating doctrine, it was necessary to unequivocally establish Fatimah's body as different, and for a creative juxtaposition of Israʾiliyyat narratives that portrayed Eve as an enemy of the Prophet's daughter. This creative theology has ultimately constructed two antithetical models of womanhood that are centered on an ontology that finds its basis in the female reproductive system and its immanence or transcendence.

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